

*The moment of truth:  
Discussion before declaring the German Empire*

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The proclamation of the German Empire took place in France at the Palace of Versailles in the Hall of Mirrors. On January 18, 1871, dignitaries from all over Germany united together to proclaim the new emperor. The document that I extensively researched was *Final Discussions before the Proclamation of the German Empire* which took place on January 17-18, 1871. The document is written by Otto Von Bismarck who was the mastermind behind unification and who was a strong influence in the deliberations prior to the ceremony. The document was originally published in his memoirs, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen*, which were published in 1899 a year after his death. The focus of the document is the conflict that he had with the Prussian king, Wilhelm, who was known to always have had bitter disagreements with Bismarck.

“The discussion of the title question reached no clear conclusion; still one could feel justified in scheduling the ceremony of the imperial proclamation, but the King had ordered that there would be no mention of the German Emperor, but rather the Emperor of Germany.”<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm was stubborn in his belief that he wanted to be proclaimed the Emperor of Germany. While doing my research I noticed that this disagreement was significant and was predominant in Bismarck’s biographies.

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<sup>1</sup> Otto von Bismarck, *Gedanken und Erinnerungen* [Thoughts and Reminiscences], ed. Horst Kohl, 3 vols. Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1898, vol. 2 (Ch. 23: Versailles), pp. 119-22. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=960](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=960)

I began my research by looking at his memoirs *Bismarck, The Man & the Statesman* which were translated by A.J Butler. The memoirs are split into three books and the text is found in volume two. I contrasted the text from his memoirs to the contrasting viewpoint from Crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm<sup>2</sup>. The crown prince wrote positively about the discussions writing that his father the King was being completely reasonable when discussing the title of emperor and coat of arms. It is the opposite on Bismarck's account, Bismarck ran out of patience with the soon to be emperor and the next day at the ceremony refused to speak to the emperor.

Next, I turned to the New York Times and London Times archive. One article I found on the New York Times was titled *William Proclaimed Emperor of Germany. An Eventful Scene in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles*. It focused on the pageantry of the occasion and the glory of the new German empire. No mention of Bismarck was made in the article which I find very interesting because he was the second if not the first most important man in that room. The second article I found was a review of his memoirs, *Bismarck's own book; The One Known as His Autobiography, Passages from the First Part of It*. This article states how his memories came into fruition. Bismarck was approached after he left office by the Cotta publishing house and Bismarck agreed to write about his life at the center of politics. It mentions how Bismarck's qualifications he had makes his memoirs one the best that anyone in power has written. On the London Times database I found *The crown of Germany*, which was written by a Prussian correspondent. This article glorified the defeat of the French and the victory and strength of the Germans.

After looking at various articles I turned to the biographies of Bismarck which were plentiful. First I looked at a biography published by Edgar Feuchtwanger. Feuchtwanger was helpful in adding more context to the narrative. He added insight into how mad Bismarck really was. A letter from Bismarck to his wife Johanna he wrote,

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<sup>2</sup> *Kaiser Friedrich III. Tagebücher von 1848-1866* [*Kaiser Friedrich III. Journals from 1848-1866*], ed. Heinrich Otto Meisner. Leipzig: R.F. Koehler, 1926. [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=2732](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=2732)

“This imperial birth was difficult, and kings at such times have their strange cravings, like women before they give to the world they cannot retain. As accoucheur I frequently felt the strong urge to become a bomb and to explode so that the whole edifice should sink into ruins.”<sup>3</sup>

Lothar Gall another historian who published a Bismarck biography, adds another level of context and his own perspective on the deliberations. He states that all the focus on victory and military strength was a “disastrous demonstration of the superiority over the victor.” I compared this argument with the other research I had did and I found that the articles and biographies all helped Gall’s argument.

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<sup>3</sup> Bismarck. Die gesammelten Werke (Friedrichsruher Ausgabe), edited by Gerhard Ritter, Rudolf Stadelmann, 15 vols, Berlin, 1924-35, vol.14.2.p.816.letter dated 21 Jan 1871.

## Annotated Bibliography:

Unknown. "EUROPE.; William Proclaimed Emperor of Germany. An Eventful Scene in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles." *The New York Times*. 21 January 1871:1. Times Machine Collection Archive. Web. 14 November 2018.

The only figurehead who is mentioned in the article is the newly proclaimed Emperor, William. I found it very interesting that Bismarck who orchestrated it all did not even get a mention. Instead, dignitaries from various principalities are written in detail about how they were dressed and what role they played during the ceremony.

"The Crown of Germany." *Times* [London, England] 27 Jan. 1871: 5. *The Times Digital Archive*.

Gives an account by a Prussian correspondent on the opulent ceremony that took place in the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. Focuses on the military pageantry and various high-ranking nobles and princes that filled the room during the proclamation. Puts Germany on a pedestal and takes aim on the French who are at last humiliated.

Bismarck, Otto , and Horst Kohl. *Gedanken Und Erinnerungen: 1*. Stuttgart: Cotta, 1898. Print.

Bismarck chose to write accounts about events in his life after being approached by the Cotta publishing house. Interesting to note that it took several years for Bismarck to draft and then finalize. Another note is that the reflections were made in the last decade of his life, so he must have known that these writings were to leave behind the myth of his legacy.

Unknown." Bismarck's own book; The One Known as His Autobiography, Passages from the First Part of It". *The New York Times*. Saturday review of books and art. 3 December 1898: 13-14. Times machine archive. Web. 14 November 2018.

The book review written by the New York Times highlights the active voice that Bismarck gives in his memoirs. The review highlights the way in which he speaks, he speaks with grit, honesty, and tenacity.

Gall, Lothar. *Bismarck, the White Revolutionary*. London; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986.v. I

Gall mentions that there was widespread criticism of the scene at the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles. Gall recounts the letter of Prince Otto of Bavaria to his brother Ludwig II, Otto described the scene as proud, boastful, proud and ugly.